

## EDITORIAL

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# Public Sentiment Shifts In Our Favor

**P**ublic opinion is a lot like a loaded freight train. It takes an enormous amount of force to get it moving, but once it reaches critical velocity, it's virtually impossible to stop. Consider cigarettes. In less than a lifetime, the public opinion of smoking has gradually evolved from "socially acceptable habit" to "dangerous addiction." Having reached critical velocity, anti-smoking sentiment currently seems unstoppable. Mentioning music in the same breath as smoking may seem incongruous. But, in the same way empirical evidence gradually set anti-smoking sentiment in motion, new discoveries could help get the populace firmly behind music making.

For decades, the prevailing scientific wisdom was that the brain's circuitry was hardwired by adolescence and inflexible by adulthood. In other words, from around 16 onwards, your brainpower was a constant. Now, thanks to extensive research on stroke victims, evidence suggests that the brain works a lot like a muscle...the harder you use it, the stronger it grows. Studies show that stimulating mental activity enhances mental ability throughout a person's lifetime...enhancing cognitive skills for children and delaying the onset of Alzheimer's disease. So, where does music come in?

Scientists point to playing music as one of the most powerful brain-building activities. In the July issue of Life magazine, Arnold Scheible, head of UCLA's Brain Research Institute, remarks, "As soon as you decide to take up the violin, your brain has a whole new group of problems to solve. But that's nothing compared with what the brain has to do before the violinist can begin to read the notes on a page and correlate them with his or her fingers to create tones. This is a remarkable high-level type of activity that serves as a stimulus for dendritic growth, which means it adds to the computational reserves in your brain." He adds, "Remember, it's never too late. All of life should be a learning

experience. Not just for the trivial reasons, but because by continuing the learning process, we are challenging our brain and therefore building brain circuitry."

What an endorsement! The head of an important scientific research center says in a national publication that playing music "adds to the computational reserves in your brain." One article in Life magazine is not going to change the industry's fortunes. But a growing drumbeat of publicity on the cerebral benefits of music just might.

The benefits of music are well known within industry. However, past industry attempts to spread the word to a wider audience have generally been dismissed as tainted by commercial self-interest. More recent efforts on the part of NAMM to fund research on music's effect on the brain, and the Piano Manufacturers "Study of Piano Enhances Life's Learning," seem to be bearing fruit.

A recent Gallup survey, commissioned for NAMM's Music USA, suggests changing public sentiment in favor of musical participation. According to the poll, over 90% agree strongly that "music participation develops a child's creativity," "helps a child's overall intellectual development," "teaches self-discipline," "is part of a well rounded education," and "helps channel energy in a creative way." These levels of agreement are up noticeably from 1992 and 1987 polls. Clearly, public belief in the health benefits of music is picking up steam.

Just as athletic equipment manufacturers benefited from the public's increased concern with physical fitness, the music industry could benefit from a growing belief in the importance of mental fitness. Here's hoping that public sentiment continues to gain momentum.

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